

Revolutionary Consciousness in Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*

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Abstract

The contemporary African novelist has accepted the responsibility of projecting the realism of a world torn by class antagonism and inequalities in access to property. The revolutionary literary work of art is a depiction of the contradictions inherent in a world dominated by class structure and capitalist exploitation. Unlike the traditional African characters portrayed in Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, who are easily broken up due to lack of solidarity, Sembene demonstrates in God's Bits of Wood the emergence of a new African labour force committed to a cause, the cause of economic and social liberation from the shackles of colonialism. This revolution requires solidarity and determination in order to succeed. This is aptly portrayed in the manner and doggedness all the people defy the gun-fitted bayonet to actualized their set goal.

Keywords: solidarity, revolutionary, capitalism

Revolutionary reality is a force for producing new thought, new image and new totality in nature and experience unhindered by economic and social forces. The struggle brings about great awareness and maturity in the characters. This struggle creates in the characters a new zeal and termination to be free from the imperialists' economic strangulation and thus bequeath an egalitarian society to the future generation. It creates martyr in characters like Penda, a despised whore.

It is in the light of the above that charac like Ramatoulaye takes a firm stand in her determination to challenge and possibly change the social system she reveals the revolutionary in her by recognizing the fact that they are living through a difficult time. Udumukwu describes these 'hard times' as "containing significant thread to potentiality and fulfillment", since the present condition does not amount to a finitude" (8). These "hard times" symbolizes a process of growth cutting across gender boundaries. The novel portrays hope for the oppressed as their desire for freedom outweighs their suffering. This optimism is expressed in Fa Keita's declaration, "Our world is opening up" (88).

This paper examines the consciousness of the characters in *God's Bits of Wood* towards their social and economic conditions which culminates in a strike action. The consciousness of the workers is awakened due to the gross injustice perpetrated by the imperialists, and the economic inequalities among the railway workers in Thies, Bamako and Dakar. The fact is that the masses have risen to fulfill their historic mission, the mission of determining their dignity and emancipation. Lenin encourages violence as a tool of revolution and self-emancipation. He says:

Regardless of what you do, it is moral if it brings the world closer to eradicating social class. An action is moral when it helps to overthrow the bourgeoisie (103).

It is a demonstration of hope in a precarious living condition. The novel portrays a revolutionary zeal and positive vision. It is never pessimistic, as Udentia rightly puts:

For it knows that no matter how bad the present order is, no matter the degree of anomie, and social dysfunctionism, a ray of hope is still held out in the coming struggle of the broad mass of the people for a different socio-economic order (74).

For Bakayoko, the urgent mission is the economic liberation and restoration of the dignity of heavily exploited and marginalized African working class. He is an embodiment of the new African consciousness which entails the struggle for economic freedom. The revolutionary arrowhead in the organization of the strike action who comes to find solution to an entangled situation. As a Marxist-oriented character, he exudes a great deal of strength and courage to further the cause of the struggle. He becomes the rallying point for solidarity, long-suffering and doggedness.

Nnolim attributes their "epic victory against the Europeans", to this solidarity and in the process, "commanding

respect and achieving dignity..." (51). The continuity of a totally inhuman, exploitative, and discredited system often leads to violence. The eruptive violence in *Gods Bits of Wood* is an accumulated aggression in the poor masses in reaction to the oppression and injustice suffered in the hands of the imperialists and the African compradors. The defiance of "fixed bayonets and tear-gas" which are tools of oppression, by the workers indicated their resolve to take their destiny in their own hands. This lends credence to Fanon's assertion that colonialism entails "a furious determination to deny them all attributes of humanity (which) forces the people it dominates to ask themselves questions constantly" (200). Adebayo sees the characters in Sembene's pre-independence novels as positive matured revolutionary heroes, attributing their victory to their "wide experience, physical energy, broad-mindedness, selflessness and faith in the future of the African mass and in the destiny of the African youth: (60), the foregoing serves as their guiding principles. The role of women in the struggle for economic liberation and social order cannot be overemphasized. They are portrayed by Sembene as a positive and motivating force. He portrays the women characters as having grown above the traditional feminine roles in African context. They play leading role in the struggle for economic freedom and restoration of African dignity.

Udumukwu sums up Sembene's craftsmanship in using women in the roles that traditionally would have been gender-biased when he says

Sembene demystifies any form of gender discrimination against the women. The struggle is neither that of men nor even of the women, both genders unite to make the struggle a people-oriented struggle (12).

The strike thrusts women to the forefront of the struggle. This is unAfrican because such roles are reserved for men. The strength in Ramatoulaye, the transformation in N'deye Touti and the maturity in Penda are evidences of an unbiased gender struggle.

Gikandi states that;

... those people who learn from their experiences or from the examples of others are elevated into cultural heroes, even when they died serving their people (124).

N'deye Touti suffers brutal detachment from the society which makes her feel dispossessed and incapable of dominating her own life. This is alienation in the true sense of it. The strike creates the awareness that brings back the women back to the reality of the world around them. Tiemoko observes this latter when he says that, 'the strike is like a school for all of us, both males and females'. (85)

God's Bits of Wood is a work of art committed to changes of existing social reality in Africa, changes in positions which are initially perceived as firm and unchangeable. The strike acts as the catalyst for change by which the workers are forced to ask themselves questions about their identities as a colonized people. Ironically, characters who prefer to serve their own needs are destroyed by the very forces they do not want to confront as in the case of Saukoure, the watchman. Douadou the secretary of the strike committee demonstrates this feeling of uncertainty as memories of past strike which was ruthlessly crushed, keep haunting him to ask if the strike is justified. But the solidarity and collective will of the workers strengthen him, and he sees no point in allowing "old pears" to be the "basis for present actions". The physical conflict between the workers and the forces of coercion is only a manifestation of the feeling of hopelessness and despair.

Bakayoko links himself absolutely with the people's cause for economic freedom and achieves this objective by leading the people successfully in the struggle for economic emancipation. He is fearless even in the face of brutality. Some of his revolutionary speeches betray the militancy in him. He does not conceal his distrust and grievances for indigenous politicians. Sembene builds a myth around him as the organizing principle in the strike action, who comes in to provide solution to an otherwise entangled situation. He acts the link between the three towns of Thies, Bamako and Dakar, where strike takes place. He symbolizes confidence and a source of inspiration when the people's faith is shaken. He is a "promethean figure, remote, enigmatic, sculpted out of pure intellect and omniscience" (117). *God's Bits of Wood* represents different ideas to different schools of thought. To one, the novel has bread as the fundamental issue of discourse. In other words, the struggle is all about an immediate means for survival. And so "the strike itself is a negative counter-measure embarked upon to obtain a denied good" (Nnolim, 54). To the other, it is not a struggle geared towards obtaining basic human needs such as food. He argues that the novel is based on the premise of time and that the struggle is to "make a new form of sense out of received ideas and values" (Udumukwu, 3). The latter is in line with the process of growth, consciousness and change which form the basis of discourse. This change is marked in the transformation of N'deye Touti from being mesmerized by the colonial tradition, ideas and values to African values and culture.

Suffice it to say that the tension is between labour and capital, between the forces of progress and reaction. The workers must mass to fight for their economic emancipation. Okafor draws a comparison between the industrial revolution which took place in Europe between the 18th and 19th century in its radical effect to the colonial assault on Africa in the 19th and 20th century. He posits the two phenomena are both a result of the strangle hold of triumphant capitalism which gives rise to violent and rapid changes in the affected societies. This corroborates Maduka's opinion of the bourgeois as "mean, egocentric individuals who are only interested in preserving the integrity of their economic investment" (201).

Capitalist exploitation alienates the individual from the work of his hands, from nature and from society. Consequently, the individual feels estranged from the fundamental issues that concern his life. He loses control over the orientation of his life in relation to the world around him.

The individual feels a stranger in his own world. Marxist socialism therefore aims to cure human being of this existential malady by making it possible for man to regain control of his world and establish a new social order.

He must refuse to accept the "divide and rule" tactics by the forces of coercion. Characters like Diara and Dauoda Beaugosse are bought over in addition to the cutting off of food and water supplies. They place their own welfare above the collective good, unlike Doudou who turns down an offer of three million francs and promise of promotion as prizes for defection. There are also blacks like the politicians who are not really interested in the fate of the working class, such as the Imam, who sees the actions of the workers as "against the will of God" (124), and appeals to their religious consciousness. This is an indication that religion is a veritable tool in the hands of the bourgeois by appealing to the consciousness of the oppressed.

However, of great significance is the process of growth and maturity which the characters pass through in the novel. They come to realize emancipation – economical or political does not come by defection but by unity for a common cause. The responsibility of the revolutionary imagination is the depiction of the contradiction inherent in a world dominated by private property, class rifts and capitalist exploitation as well as the projection of a more egalitarian world. The focus in revolutionary literary works centred around depicting the prevalent social malaise which came to the fore with the attainment of independence when the socio-political gulf between the ruling class and the masses became more pronounced.

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